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ABSTRACT

Based on the view that fostering positive values and a sense of community in children is the heart of the early childhood teacher's role, this booklet offers suggestions for instilling respect, responsibility, and compassion in young children in early childhood settings. The booklet presents a philosophy and a set of practices by which preschool classrooms may become communities that work for everyone. The booklet begins with an observation of a preschool classroom and notes that the process of developing a classroom of children into a community whose members regard each other with growing respect, trust, and compassion depends on the teacher or leader. The booklet maintains that teachers build a community on four components of leadership: (1) acceptance of the leadership role; (2) knowledge of child development and learning; (3) knowledge of early childhood curriculum and practice; and (4) a commitment to communicating respect by caring for the classroom environment and modeling respect. Each of these leadership components is examined in turn, focusing on the responsibility of the preschool teacher and providing suggestions for ways each component can be implemented in the early childhood classroom to teach values of compassion and responsibility. The booklet notes that for some children, safety and order take priority over sowing seeds of compassion and responsibility and makes suggestions for teaching children with behavior problems. The booklet concludes by asserting that although leadership demands a great deal from good teachers, administrators, and other staff, the efforts to achieve excellence in teaching are worthwhile. (Contains 21 references.) (KB)

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Jeannette G. Stone

National Association for the Education of Young Children

2001

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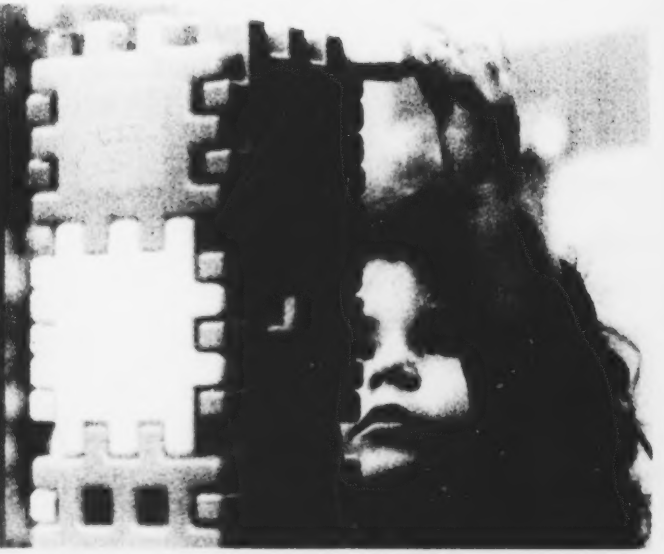

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The Early Childhood Teacher's Role

Jeannette G. Stone

About the Author

Jeannette Stone has worked in early childhood education since 1953—teaching nursery school and Head Start children, writing for Head Start and NAEYC, and participating in the production of teaching-training films. Mrs. Stone has served as a child care administrator and consultant and has traveled extensively to children's centers here and abroad. In 1974 she joined the psychology faculty at Sarah Lawrence College as director of its Early Childhood Center.

After her retirement from Sarah Lawrence in 1982, Jeannette taught early childhood education for several years at the New Hampshire Technical Institute in Concord, and she has continued as a child care consultant and writer in New England. She lives on Block Island, Rhode Island, and in Stony Creek, Connecticut.

Building Classroom Community

The Early Childhood Teacher's Role

Jeannette G. Stone

An NAEYC Comprehensive Membership Benefit

National Association for the Education of Young Children
Washington, D.C.

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This book is dedicated to Dr. Mary Stuart Gile of Concord, New Hampshire—distinguished educator and community leader, my friend and colleague

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Special thanks go to longtime colleagues Margaret Copeland, Jenni Klein, and Yvette Richardson for their reviews of the manuscript and for their characteristically astute suggestions and to NAEYC publications editor Carol Copple for her patient, skillful assistance.

Note from the Author

I have based my views on my experiences from 1953 to 1997 as a preschool teacher, administrator, and consultant in cooperative preschools, Head Start programs, a college lab school, and child care centers, including special education classrooms. Children in these settings have come from diverse neighborhoods and economic and cultural backgrounds.

Staff members in centers for severely disabled children, as well as those with extremely limited budgets, may feel that particular realities prevent their adoption of some practices described here—such as class trips or purchase of quality materials, which can be expensive. I know that some teachers have to modify their programs for practical reasons, yet they are ingenious in upholding high standards.

I really believe that the basic philosophy in this book applies to all facilities for children. All children attending child care programs benefit from respectful teaching and they all belong to classroom communities, whether they are in family child care or in large inclusive urban centers. My hope is that they will enjoy learning to be together, in whatever setting they find themselves; that they will thrive as individuals; and that they will take good care of each other.

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Introduction

As we entered the first decade of the new millennium eagerly and soberly, my colleagues in education and I found ourselves thinking about the world of elementary and secondary schools that our preschool children would encounter before long, and wondering about the kinds of school children they would become.

We had been stunned by the hostile, occasionally violent, school behavior we had witnessed on television over several months. We had heard stories of teenage scapegoating and bullying as well as stories of the indifference or disdain shown by clique members toward other people. We had heard from youngsters that past experiences of being teased or "dissed" by classmates had resulted in their humiliation and anxiety. Like so many other people, we were puzzled and troubled.

Programs for children must provide strong leadership and crystal-clear messages for children and their families.

Within professional early childhood circles, we hold certain beliefs and teach young children accordingly. We try to help each child feel valued and competent. We behave respectfully toward children and other adultsPrograms for children must provide strong leadership and crystal-clear messages for children and their families. We hope that our classrooms are microcosms of decent living and fair play, communities in which all can participate and thrive. We also hope that this kind of early education continues to influence children's thinking and behavior as they get older.

But now hard questions arise. Have we been unrealistic? One answer: even as a lot of aggression and intolerance are acted out in our society, other behaviors reflect people's generosity, kindness, and cooperation. One type of behavior is no more real than another. My colleague Yvette Richardson asks this compelling question: "How do we shape classroom life to reflect a spirit of social justice and equality . . . of tolerance and respect?"

My own response is that it is crucial that programs for children of all ages provide strong leadership and crystal-clear

messages for both children and their families about what we believe in, what we work toward, and how we want people to behave and to care for and about each other.

I believe that these messages are extremely important and helpful to children, beginning early in life and continuing as they grow. Cop-out slogans such as "kids will be kids" or "they'll grow out of it" actually impede the development of values like compassion and responsibility, both at home and at school. All the more reason, then, for us to teach such values with conviction. We see how compassion and responsibility transform classrooms into communities that work for everyone.

In this book I describe a philosophy and set of practices by which classrooms may become such communities. We begin in a preschool where we see a good program in action.

Visit to a preschool classroom

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Visit to a preschool classroom

Let's visit a group of 3- and 4-year-old children in a preschool classroom housed in a comprehensive child care center in a midsize American city. It is April.

Entering the room we pass, to our left, a pet rabbit in his large floor cage—a beloved sentinel—and large, well-stocked block shelves to our right. We continue to a colorful house space furnished like a kitchen and living area with dress-ups, a small stove and refrigerator, and doll beds with dolls of all sizes and colors. To our left is a children's studio and laboratory area equipped with a copious supply of art materials, manipulatives, simple language and math materials, a water table, and a low shelf covered with plants, an aquarium, magnifying glasses, and related science picture books. Here are two spacious worktables: one to accommodate children occupied with self-initiated artwork, and the other, on this particular day, offering fitting toys—puzzles, Lego sets. We notice an inviting book corner. Children's artwork is matted and displayed on the walls along with a local artist's drawings and an abstract art print.

What captures one's attention is the dynamic, comfortable atmosphere.

What captures my attention is the dynamic, comfortable atmosphere. Sixteen in number, the children were about 3 years of age (plus or minus a bit) when they arrived last September from home or from a program for toddlers and twos. Now in the spring they are veteran preschoolers, and today this is how they busy themselves: four build with blocks, planning, debating, and trying out ideas; two paint at the easel; one designs a collage; three work side by side fitting wooden puzzles together; one constructs a Lego tower. A couple of house players are "cooking" for a 3-year-old grandma feeding a baby doll in her lap. Two children blow bubbles at the water table. The room hums with talk, laughter, exclamations, a shout, a wail, teachers' responses, conversations and exchanges rising, falling, and unending.

Ten minutes later some of these children will be in the same places, deeper into the intricacies of their work and play. Others will have moved on to different areas. During this play/work period of about an hour, the children choose what they want to do from materials set out by their teachers, often in response

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The teacher purposefully leads children from the world of *me* to the world of *us.*

to children's interests. At this point in time these children are friendly, purposeful, and cooperative classmates. Have they been so all along?

During the beginning September weeks 16 new-to-school 3-year-olds presented themselves, separate and as yet unconnected. Some were curious, wide-eyed, and eager; some apprehensive and uncertain; some sure of themselves; some aggressive; some wanting their parents; some independent one day and crying for Mom the next; some actively exploring; some observing. Every child was fully engaged in his or her daily encounters with the group's personalities, confusions, shared pleasures, and growing connections.

The process of helping a classroom of individual children (many new to each other at the start of a program) develop into a community of children who regard each other with growing respect, interest, and trust depends on the teacher or leader. When the goal is a classroom in which children come to know and care about each other and develop mutual regard

and concern, the teacher purposefully leads children over time from the world of *me* to the world of *us*.

How does the teacher accomplish this goal? What is her philosophy regarding what young children can learn about the world around them and about themselves and each other? How do they grow from self-concern to concern for each other in their classroom community? What are the teacher's strategies for planning, day-to-day? What does she have to know? On what basis does she build this community?

The creation of classroom community begins with a sturdy foundation, which I call *teacher guidance and leadership*. The next section examines what makes up this foundation.

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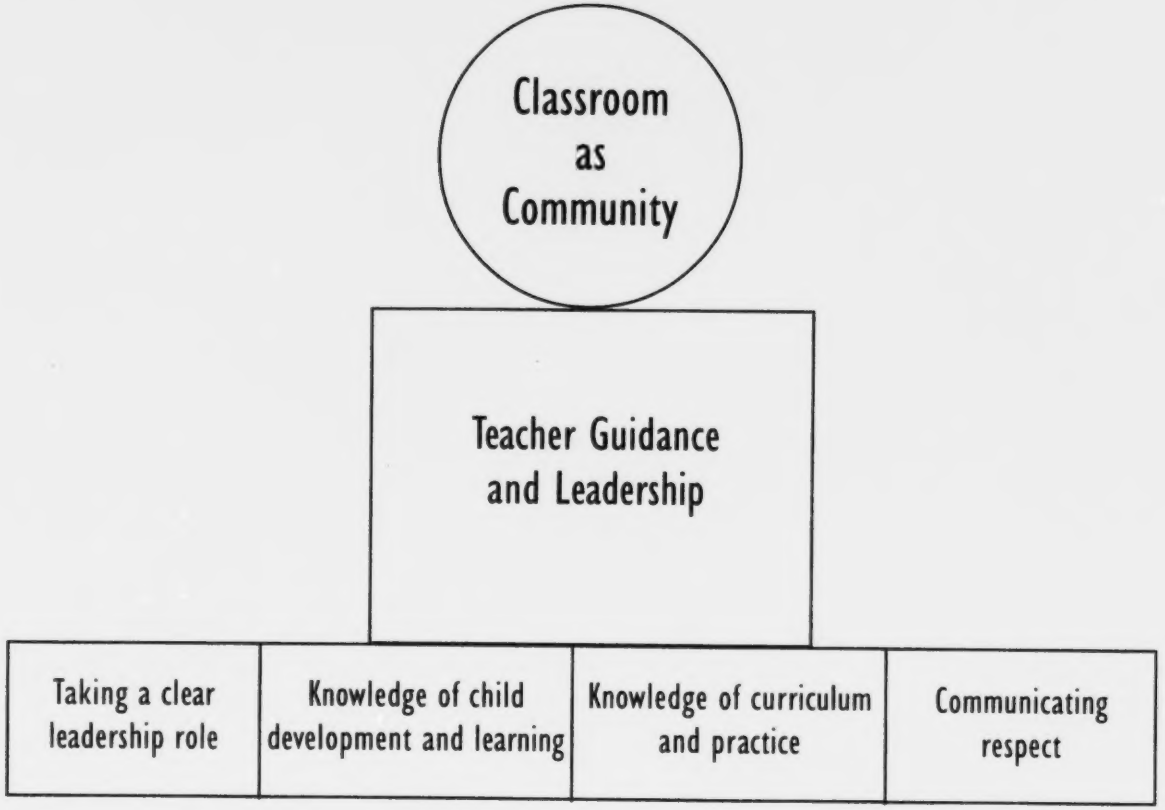
Teacher Guidance and Leadership

Strong democratic leadership is suffused with respect for the lives and history of the people it represents and for the abilities and needs of all involved. We may see such leadership in a parent, child care director, coach, or secondary school principal—or in a successful store manager, supervisor of a hospital ward, or construction crew foreman. It is the leader who spells out goals, affirms values, maintains safety and comfort. The leader encourages, clarifies, and points the way—always communicating respect for the work done and the people doing it.

The leader encourages, clarifies, and points the way.

Early childhood teachers who are effective leaders do all of these things. And day by day they guide and teach young children to become caring, responsible members of the classroom community. The foundation of teacher guidance and leadership rests on these four supports:


Classroom as Community
Teacher Guidance and Leadership
Taking a clear leadership role
Knowledge of child development and learning
Knowledge of curriculum and practice
Communicating respect

- *Taking a clear leadership role*
- Knowledge of child development and learning
- Knowledge of early childhood curriculum and practice
- Communicating to children respect for themselves, for others, and for their surroundings.

Taking a clear leadership role

Leadership in early education programs is essential for the program director or principal, as well as for the head teacher of each classroom. These education leaders are most effective when they understand children's development and learning, have plenty of experience in the classroom, believe in the benefit of strong guidance to children and families and feel responsible for providing it. A modicum of modesty and humor helps too.

Good leaders are firmly in charge. They never abuse power but also never feel weak or apologetic about assuming it. The leader values the individual differences among all persons under her direction and believes in the dignity and respect due each and every one. She feels responsible to the entire group of

children in the classroom, the staff, and the parents. Balance is important; the effective leader manages to clarify goals and rules while also projecting friendliness, good faith, and optimism.

An understated or tentative style of direction might seem more flexible or laid-back to some but ultimately tends to confuse people, inviting them to test the limits and muddying the issues at hand. Harsh leadership is, of course, valued mostly by the harsh leader! It excludes democratic processes and may generate apathy or mutiny.

When I contemplate problems with weak or harsh leadership in teaching, I must make an effort to define democratic, effective leadership. It is this. Effective leaders are notable for their knowledge and wisdom, their decisionmaking skill, and their ability to listen, reflect, and communicate clearly and work toward mutually trusting relationships. They establish and adhere to common sense, humane standards for one and all.

For example, if bullying is going on and the person in charge doesn't like it—and we hope he doesn't—he takes steps to stop it. He explains his position and sets forth what is and is not

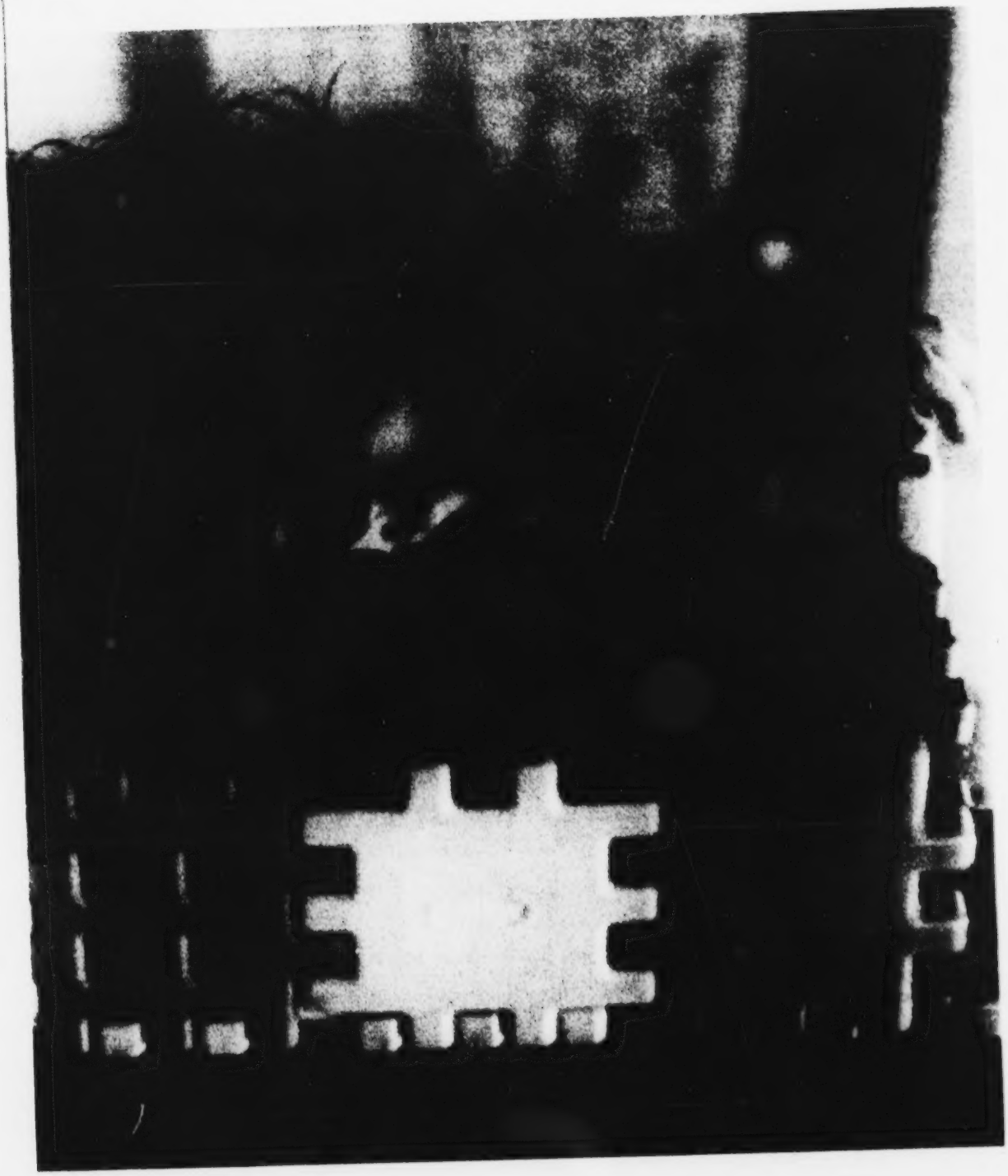
acceptable. He follows that with clear, positive suggestions. No double-talk, no confusing messages. This unambiguous, fair, firm leadership provides security and clarity for all involved, whether in preschool or college, whether the group numbers 16 or 1,600. It provides the foundation necessary for the classroom to become a community that works for everyone.

Knowledge of child development and learning

Serious educators have a strong, persistent interest in how children develop, how life circumstances influence them, and how teaching practices impair or enhance their development in all areas.

There are many helpful sources of information about what children are like at different ages and stages. These include textbooks, research reports, college and graduate courses, conferences, and discussion with mentors and peers. It behooves teachers and directors to see themselves not as already knowing the field but rather as lifelong learners of it.

Teachers and directors should be lifelong students of child development and learning.



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A wonderful resource for continuous learning is analysis of one's own daily experience. On a typical day, reflection might include thoughts like these:

- How can I present alternative materials to the children who felt today's setup at the science table was too tough? Challenge is fine, but this was really too hard; it turned many of them off. Next time I will offer a much wider range of materials.
- The Katz and Chard ([1989] 2000) project approach is compelling, and we are talking about introducing it this spring, starting with fours and fives. All of us on the staff are eager to learn more about it.
- It would make sense to treat the children to a snack of blueberries before I read *Blueberries for Sal* again; today some of them didn't know what blueberries were.
- I need to find out from Raymond's father when the new baby is due. Raymond is having a rough time these days, and we'd like to help him feel better.

Observe children with your eyes and mind wide open.

When you recall, reflect, imagine different scenarios, mull over your observations of each child, and contemplate the group's total well-being, you are your own special resource. You integrate your own insights and experiences with the information available to you from books, journals, and colleagues.

As a fellow teacher might put it, you need to know your stuff, to be familiar with the past and present child development literature first of all. You will want to learn all you can about the basics of the infant and toddler years for background. You need to observe children—not just casually, but with your eyes and mind wide open.

You note differences between twos and threes, threes and fours, fours and fives—all growing, changing, edging forward in physical skill, language and intellectual development, and social growth. You know that twos seek autonomy and can be quite oppositional, though endearing. You know that threes are often sunny in disposition and are learning language in ways that help them make friends as well as understand stories; you know too that they can regress to biting or whining, then leap forward to becoming helpful, polite, cooperative—sometimes all in the same day!

You are familiar with fours' uneven behavior: their humor (which can be colorful), their flair for cognitive mastery along with imaginative and creative thinking, and their occasional bursts of emotion—expressing jealousy, sympathy, fear, or just delight in being alive. Fives are more mature in a number of ways, but they are still preschoolers. Usually more stable, more reflective, more articulate, and more socially competent than they were at 4, 5-year-olds can slide back just when you think they've come such a long way. In general, they respond eagerly to kindergarten activities that call for them to pursue an activity with diligence, grasp an abstraction, concentrate, recall, cooperate, hone a skill, delay gratification, or speak pleasantly—none of which were solid attributes a year before.

We adults can't help feeling excited and gratified when children make developmental progress. They grow larger, stronger, and smarter. Their vocabularies burgeon. They become more independent, more skillful, more experienced, and more organized. They're on their way. But every so often they display a contrasting developmental need: the need to regress. Just when they have succeeded in pleasing themselves and us with

We find ways to accommodate children as they rock along their uneven way—two steps forward, one step backward.

their new accomplishments, they may turn back to whining, dawdling, acting helpless, sighing, and crying out, "I can't!"

This kind of regression is a legitimate developmental phenomenon that builds up in children (in adults too, for that matter). As teachers, we find ways to accommodate children as they rock along their uneven way—two steps forward, one step backward, and then, of course, forward once again. A concomitant of regression is children's occasional need to slow down. It is the developmental need children have for consolidating their gains, for feeling secure in their growth, and for enjoying the sensation of mastery: "I learned how . . . I can do this myself."

Experienced teachers are patient while children rehearse and practice and repeat what they have learned to do. The curriculum can take on a more deliberate pace for a while. Children need adults who take all this seriously and accept their behavior, no matter how slow or uneven their progress seems to be. They want to be able to trust us to be understanding and good-humored. They benefit from our knowledge of human development and our faith that all will be well.

However, once in a while teachers may reach a point of wondering whether a particular child needs to be observed more intently or evaluated by a specialist. The child's behavior may be increasingly puzzling or worrisome to us. Judging when to proceed from careful observation and discussion with the child's parents to recommending that parents seek the help of specialists is a difficult but crucial role for teachers and directors.

Early childhood educators are obliged to think about children with these considerations in mind: what observation reveals about the child in question and what the knowledge of development and learning adds to good judgment and wisdom about this child and all children.

Knowledge of curriculum and practice

The task of providing developmentally appropriate education for preschool children is complex and challenging. Drawing on what we understand about children's development, upon which curriculum is partly based, we know that a class will include children at various developmental levels. In a class of 4-year-olds,

say, there will be children who developmentally are more like 3-year-olds, those who are more like 5-year-olds, and everything in between. Some preschoolers develop slowly, needing easygoing activities; some race along, tackling challenging materials and projects with zest. The teacher's task is to value each child as is, observe closely, and try to respond to each child's personality, cultural heritage, and unique needs and capabilities—while at the same time attending to and engaging the whole class.

To create an appropriate, substantial preschool curriculum, you, the teacher, visualize your program every day and then prepare the spaces and materials necessary to bring your planning about. You allow plenty of flexibility in order to respond to children's interests and the events in their lives. You rely on all you've learned about early education and how it differs from primary education. You opt for a basic teaching approach—perhaps the developmental-interaction philosophy (e.g., Biber, Shapiro, & Wickens 1977). You stay current as well on approaches such as High/Scope, Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and the myriad variations practiced in the leading college and university lab schools, including those programs offered to

The teacher's task is to observe closely and respond to each child's unique needs and capabilities.

As children see themselves mirrored in their teachers' eyes as worthy of serious interest, they come to feel good about themselves.

children with special needs. Dynamic eclecticism grows out of a lively, open-minded study of curricula.

Good preschool programs typically include extended play times, storytime, group conversation or circle, some music, snacks or lunch, and outdoor play. Strands of early science, mathematics, language and literacy, art, music, and movement weave throughout the curriculum. An enormous body of literature exists on preschool curriculum. This book is clearly not an attempt to summarize it or to offer novel ideas for activities.

The aim here is to look at the ways children's day-to-day experiences influence not only their individual progress and well-being but also their perception of themselves as members of the class. As individual children see themselves mirrored in their teachers' eyes as worthy of serious interest, attention, and approval, they come to feel good and worthy about themselves. As time goes on and individual needs are met with warmth and respect, children appear able to move out, toward each other, feeling safe, liking the feeling of belonging together, and liking to play together.

Leading early childhood scholars and practitioners believe that play is basic to the preschool curriculum (Van Hoorn et al. 1999). *Play* is a word I want to qualify, however. Play must be valued by teachers as central to early education and crucial to children's learning and thriving. For play to be satisfying and enjoyable to both children and adults, it has to be constructive. That means that keeping track of play, and subtly shepherding it, is a vital teacher role. It is a travesty to permit play to degenerate into a chaotic free-for-all; it is a travesty too for teachers to direct a "play" period in which young children are expected to sit for long periods doing table work, or for teachers to limit their adult approval to children who are quiet and "nice."

There are common misconceptions about play and free play. The term *free play* doesn't mean kids are free to dash about, heedless of people and objects around them, with their teachers looking puzzled or helpless. Free play means that children are free to choose from a variety of engaging, enticing activities prepared and set forth by teachers for constructive use. It is meant to be safe and fun and imaginative and purposeful.

Constructive free play needs teachers who are willing to work at it.

As Margery Franklin says, "Learning through play begins early, close at hand, as the child explores and uses a range of materials in the classroom, as she comes together with others to develop play structures and scenarios" (1999, 5). Constructive free play needs teachers who are willing to work at it, always available to help, encourage, set limits, interpret. Sometimes a lot of guidance is needed, sometimes little or none. Teachers tune in even as they make sure not to intrude.

Things can't go harmoniously and comfortably if the program is allowed to become either too difficult and frustrating or too easy and stagnant. How might you review your plans when some children gravitate to the playdough table every day as if by magnetic force, while others seem to be searching for new complex projects to tackle? It's not a matter of keeping preschoolers entertained or amused. It's a matter of responding to their growing interests, capabilities, and life experiences with dynamic curricular enrichment.

Preschool kids need lots of great things to do. Again, you're the teacher. Are there fresh science materials set out to dis-

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cover and explore? Can you provide water and sand play every so often? How about cooking or fingerpainting? Maybe a pretend car wash with small rubber cars in basins filled with soapy water or in the water table can be followed by a trip to an actual car wash? How about other trips to a florist, say, or a lumberyard, a bus station, a bird sanctuary, a park with a big pile of leaves in the fall, or a building where there's a spiral staircase? (And back at school you suggest building a spiral staircase with blocks.)

Some of these could be walking trips. Stroll around the outside of your building; the kids can look at windows, doors, and angles of roofs and then compare them with those of the building next door. They often like to work on such observations with buddies or in small teams, telling each other what they see, checking each other's findings. One day, with a supply of graph paper and pencils, children might graph tree varieties growing nearby or car models parked along the road, comparing notes and helping each other. City children may gather in small clusters, with magnifying glasses, to examine tiny plants pushing up between sidewalk cracks. Mutual help and group

Remember, curriculum isn't limited to teachers' plans and activities.

exchanges seem to happen especially easily and naturally in the outdoors.

Have you had a chance to prepare a couple of kits to take out to the playground to enrich the outdoor environment as carefully as you do the indoors? In a few tote bins include some rhythm instruments to be carried to the yard for an impromptu parade, one day, or a supply of magnifying glasses, paper, markers, scissors, and tape; on another day collect rakes and tools with a gardening project in mind.

Remember, curriculum isn't limited to teachers' plans and activities. Opportunities drop unexpectedly into our laps for us to seize if we're receptive. And, as seen in the following episodes, many everyday experiences present opportunities to foster a feeling of community among children.

A child stomps on a caterpillar during an afternoon walk. You use the incident to share your own feelings about caring treatment of living beings. You're not angry, just clear. The child hears you—and so do the others.

A child makes a hurtful racial remark during free play. You react—not by scolding or shaming, but by telling the child and the other children outright that you don't want such talk in this class because you believe that respect is due every person, here and everywhere. What you say depends on the ages of the children listening, but you use the unplanned episode to add your convictions and ethical standards to the children's consciousness. You try not to add feelings of guilt to your message, but you are strong. The children—often from varied and diverse backgrounds—will remember what you have said.

A child teases another, "You don't have a daddy." Again you talk to the issue, saying that each family is different and each is OK. Some families have fathers, some children live with Grandma, some children stay with an aunt and uncle. You make it clear that you value each child and each family in this class and you expect people to treat each other with kindness and respect.

A child taunts another for "talking funny." Your reaction reflects your warm welcome of children and families from other countries, some speaking languages new to the class.

It isn't always quite this serious. There's the mom who drops in unexpectedly one day with a basket of apples for the class. First of all, how wonderful to have a mom visit! Then you ask, "Shall we eat the apples today at lunch or make applesauce tomorrow?"

Spontaneous use of all such occasions brings spice, vitality, and important content to prepared curriculum plans. You keep track of each child's activities and favored playmates, each child's history and evolving life experiences, and each child's health and developmental issues. You support 3- and 4-year-olds who ask how to write letters or spell words as well as those who push trucks around the room, hang out at the sand table, study the magnet set intently every day, or dress the dolls again and again. You tune in to each child's style of learning and thinking. And you gently, sensitively encourage next steps. Thus you are able to provide responsive, stimulating curriculum for this child, that child, *each* child, and for the entire class of youngsters learning about each other and learning to care about each other and their surroundings.

Far from forcing friendliness and superficial niceties, a good teacher tries for subtle, respectful ways to build mutual regard

and camaraderie among young children. She gradually leads the children day by day into a widening perception of their classmates, not only by her skillful responses to individuals but also by her attempts throughout the curriculum to foster children's interrelatedness.

Teacher at the end of a story: "What a great book! We brought it from the library yesterday, remember? You all were really listening just now. What did you think about the turtle? Yes, let's read it and talk about it again tomorrow. I'd like to hear everybody's ideas."

Teacher on the playground: "Mike, you fell off the climber pretty hard just now! Come sit on the log with me. Are you OK?" To children coming to look: "Yes, Mike had a fall. Remember when Seiko fell down last week playing with the big ball? It happens. Tony, can you bring the tissue box over? We'll stay here, Mike, until you feel better." No cajoling, no negative comments about tears. Instead, these things happen, and we take care of each other.

Teacher at circle: "Let's take a few minutes to talk together about the problem at naptime yesterday. Some of you were

The teacher leads the children into a widening perception of their classmates.

"Jim loved the big card you all signed and the pictures you drew for him."

sleepy, and some of you wanted to get up and play. Right? I want us all to figure out how to solve this problem. You're good at helping each other. What can we all do so naptime works better this afternoon?"

Teacher at circle, another day: "Have you noticed how that wall under the window always looks a little empty? Anybody have an idea for something that would look good there? A mural?!! What do the rest of you think about that idea? Great! We'll put out some paint and big paper tomorrow, and you can work together on it if you want to. When your families come for the pizza party next Friday night, they'll be able to see it."

Teacher at circle, still another day: "Today we got a call from Jim's mom saying how much he liked the package we sent when he got sick. He loved the big card you all signed and the pictures you drew for him. He'll still have to stay home a little longer. Is there anything else we can send him? Playdough? That's a good idea. Tony lives next door to Jim; he says he'll take it over. I really like the way you think of ways to help each

other out. Let's get together tomorrow morning to make up the dough and get it ready to go."

When a child tells you at snack that she likes the graham crackers, you draw the others into a spontaneous talk fest: "Keisha says she likes these crackers. Jess, how about you? And Terry? No? How about Von?" On around the table. You respond to each answer; the children look from one to the other, following your lead. They become very aware of one another. Each person and each response, so important to you, now become important to each and every one.

Such are the beginnings of the classroom as community. The seeds of caring and responsibility are being sown. I believe that these seeds flourish even when sown very early in life. When infant-toddler teachers hold very young children, smile and talk to them, sing to them and cuddle them, this warm nurturance fosters caring behavior later on in preschool and school life.

Community Building

Many preschool activities take place in groups—eating snack, playing musical or table games, joining in discussions at circle time, and of course engaging in dramatic play, building with blocks, or making a mural.

Teachers know full well that children don't automatically develop social skills and that they need ongoing guidance from adults—simple, respectful, strong guidance that values them and helps them move forward. Effective teachers look for "teachable moments" to foster children's sense of each other, and group activities provide many such moments.

A good teacher makes a point of letting the children know when things go well, that she genuinely admires their ways of getting along together. Her encouragement reinforces their feelings of respect for themselves and for each other.

Enjoying Music

Children love to move and dance: "Looby Loo," "Row Your Boat," the hokey pokey, a simple square dance, a polka—all danced alone or with partners, as kids wish.

Children love to sing. Name games are a must in creating community. Sing names one at a time or cluster three or four names together—young children can't wait too long to hear their own names. Everyone is included. Invite family members, new from other countries, to share their dances and tunes to provide an important enrichment.

If Tom or Tina doesn't want to join in, that's OK; they can be the audience or perhaps handle the tape recorder, capturing the occasion for the future. A video or series of slides of all this action makes a great feature at the next parents' meeting.

Growing Together

Gardening can be an indoor project using small cups, soil, seeds, and water. But with a small plot in the yard or even a couple of window boxes or large pots, it becomes a shared group activity. Children enjoy the planning and the doing—choosing and ordering seeds or potted plants (early in the season, peas; later, zinnias), watering, and planting. A volunteer grandparent can help put down straight rows with string and sticks. Children measure how deep the seeds go into the soil, wait, and mark progress on the calendar, then weed together in small teams. Finally there are visible results followed by shelling, cooking, and tasting the peas or picking some flowers. A wonderful final result—preparing small gifts of zinnias for family and neighbors. Having planned and worked together, children love to share the bounty with others.

Cooking is best when each child has plenty of turns to work and plenty of time for chatting, measuring, mixing, tasting, fun.

- If there's no stove, kids can assemble peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for snacktime.
- If there's a hot plate, children can roll up a batch of meatballs and fry them (with supervision) for everyone's lunch.
- If there's an oven, cookies are baked to share with everybody—custodian, bus driver, visiting nurse, the kindergartners.

Cooking is planning, shopping, mixing, and chopping; then comes the actual cooking. Best of all are the sharing of food and the appreciation of everyone's handiwork and teamwork.

Helpful Hints for Group Activities

- Divide groups into smaller clusters, so that turns are plentiful for all children. If there are only two teachers, then there are two groups (or two at a time anyway). If a volunteer or visiting parent is available, three groups will work.
- Use circle or meeting times to discuss current group activities, and allow time to cover children's questions, disagreements, and problem solving.
- Send notes home to families, describing what you're doing in class, whether it be gardening, learning songs from other countries, baking bread, or whatever.
- Acknowledge children's accomplishments. Express to the children your pride and pleasure in how well they listen to and talk with each other, at how they learn to solve problems and work together.

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Communicating respect

It takes a while. Young children have a long way to go on their journey to becoming compassionate, responsible members of a group. Sharing, turn taking, waiting patiently to have one's say—these are long-term goals we work toward, not behaviors we constantly demand now of young preschoolers (much less toddlers!). To become sharers and turn takers, children need modeling and guidance. They need time to live through childhood egocentricity, immaturity, and inexperience before coming gradually to the point of regarding other people with interest and respect, assuming this is the ideal held by the adults around them.

Children learn to respect themselves and others, as they approach school age, not by our sermonizing or venting frustration with their naturally slow pace but rather by our showing them what respect feels like and sounds like—by our showing respect for them, first of all.

Attitudes and expressions of respect start with grownups and then trickle down.

One hears a lot of lip service paid to the concept of respect. Many teachers and parents talk about the necessity for children to show them respect, and they are quite serious about it.

However, attitudes and expressions of respect start with grownups and then trickle down.

What conscientious teachers do, how they do it, and how they speak to colleagues, to parents, and to the children themselves all serve as models for ways to talk and listen to people respectfully. At the same time these teachers provide a model within their profession for care of the classroom environment.

Caring for the classroom environment

Respect for young children means that you convey in the daily schedule your understanding and acceptance of children's needs to play, to pretend, and to choose their activities. You accept their need to learn by discovery, by trial and error, and from information at hand. They need to talk, work hard, create, sing, move around, be read to, rest, run, climb, jump, get messy and clean up (with help), and enjoy nutritious food with friends and classmates. Respect for children means that you create safe, appropriate, interesting surroundings in which they are comfortable, unhurried, and able to become engaged in a wonderful variety of things to do and to learn.

It's a matter of balance. Many twos and threes like the simple satisfaction of getting to know where things are in their classrooms and feeling cozy and at home there. Older fours and fives like more novelty, more challenge and adventure.

The large furnishings of a classroom, whether for young or older preschoolers, establish sturdy, reliable places for things. Block shelves go here, tables and chairs there, art supplies near the windows. It's what's *in* and *on* these basic pieces that can offer variety, stimulation, surprise, and pleasure.

A respectful teacher takes time to add to, change, and refresh the room's supplies. She has learned that a never-changing room not only is boring but also shortchanges children intellectually. The teacher expresses regard for each child and for the group by providing truly interesting things to do and think about. The job is to keep fascinating ideas and activities flowing. In February rooms need to look more complex and challenging than they did in October.

A respectful teacher takes time to add to, change, and refresh the room's supplies.

Rotation is essential; it depends on storing some materials and setting out others. Bookshelves, carefully arranged, display appropriate, high-quality children's books—selections of

newer books rotated every couple of weeks, along with old favorites. Dress-ups should be fresh and clean, with new and different items such as vests, boots, or scarves added every so often to spark dramatic play. Manipulative sets for table work are kept in clear categories. No Legos in with the bristle blocks! Sets of table toys switch and rotate with others so that shelf displays always look fresh. Store the magnets, bring out the ColorForms, rotate Tinker Toys with hammer-and-peg sets, and so on.

You and the children will thrive in a classroom where things that have become old hat are phased out for a while, replaced by different or recycled materials to refresh the scene. "Look . . . here are the beanbags again. And the hollow blocks are back." "Remember that book about the boy's fifth birthday? It's on the bookshelf today." Then block building or reading can take off with fresh momentum.

The way in which a teacher presents easel painting can indicate respect for children's work or a lack of respect. The same red, blue, and yellow pigments week after week lose their

attraction. Interest dwindles. Try setting out different paint colors from time to time—turquoise, peach, lime, lavender—increasing and varying colors as the year progresses, especially with fours and fives. Brushes and paper should be large through most of preschool, but surprising the kids with nine-by-twelve-inch paper and small-tip brushes can set off a burst of creative enthusiasm on a rainy day.

About rainy days: special shoe boxes or bins of games and props saved especially for bad weather provide educational enrichment and enjoyment for children and teachers alike. It takes a little preparation. Some teachers save table games for long January days. Some set aside preschool sewing kits with burlap, yarn, and blunt upholstery needles. Other teachers like to prepare special art supplies in advance, such as eyedroppers, paper towels, and bright tempera paints. Whatever it is, it's fun and stimulating. You're ready for March mud or April showers, when fresh ideas will save the day.

Fresh ideas will save the day.

Children should feel cared for and respected, and feeling that way helps them to behave with care and respect.

Modeling respect

By March and April teachers have been communicating their values and information for several months of the school year. Children learn from what adults say and from how they say it. Teachers have enormous influence on children's behavior by speaking directly and honestly to them: modeling with words and manner how people deal with each other with respect, just as they would like to be dealt with. Children should feel good about being in the classroom. They should feel cared for and respected, and feeling that way helps them to behave with care and respect.

Sad to say, all too often one hears disrespectful language directed to children. Grownups bark commands, scoldings, and criticisms. Whether this happens because so many adults are stressed and overwhelmed, careless and insensitive, or holding unrealistic expectations for children's behavior, a tone of combat is set. However, experienced and wise teachers and parents show day after day that it is possible to teach children respectfully even when one feels worn down, if one believes in doing so.

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Adult courtesy is the only way for children to learn courtesy. Adult consideration for others is the only way for children to learn considerate behavior. It is the same with all behaviors. Honesty begets honesty.

Teachers' consistently lowered voices help kids learn that they don't have to shout. Of course one has to speak loudly on occasion, but not all the time! Grownups who help children put away toys may be subtly teaching how to arrange objects into orderly categories, but they are also modeling ways to extend a helping hand.

Let's say a problem erupts in a classroom of 4-year-olds. Teachers, you're the models for resolving conflict. If you get mad and yell, the children will follow suit. But teachers don't have to scold, shame, threaten. These actions don't cure misbehavior anyway and don't teach children how to behave in the future. Instead, when you model ways that clearly demonstrate your beliefs—taking a firm, calm stand against hurtful behavior, sharing your concerns or wishes with the children, stating your reasons and rules—you are modeling effective ways

Blaming and scolding merely express adult frustration and anger.

to solve problems. And I hope you use your hugs, your support, your willingness to listen, your protection, and your respect.

One hears parents and teachers—often overwhelmed by troubles in their lives—speak to children in ways that come across as belittling, hostile, or as put-downs. They use statements such as

"Stop acting like a baby."

"You did that on purpose."

"Do you want me to bite you to show you how it feels?"

"That's not nice."

"If you keep doing that, I'm never bringing you here again."

"We're not going to have any time on the playground today because you didn't pick up your toys."

Blame, blame, scold, scold. Blaming and scolding fail to accomplish what adults want to accomplish, which is to persuade children to stop, listen, and redirect their behavior. Blaming and scolding fail to show children how to do that.

They merely express adult frustration and anger. There are much more effective, and respectful, ways to speak to children. For example, try,

"No, I won't let you do that. But tell me what the problem is; I promise to listen."

"What else could you do? Let's think about it. I'll help you both figure this out."

"I'm going to stop you. Hitting and knocking people over are *out* in this class. Come, sit here with me for a minute and take a big, deep breath. Then we'll talk about what happened and what you can do next time that will work better—for you and for everyone else."

"Donald! Tell him with your words! Luis, Donald has something to say to you."

"My job is to keep you safe—to keep everybody safe. I want you to help."

"You have five minutes to put away the blocks, and I'll help you start."

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This kind of communication models reason and courtesy; it provides kids with an effective model for the times when they will need to work through frustrations and conflicts on their own. It communicates to children the fact that they can trust you. You're on their side, not against them. You may not agree with or permit what they're doing, but you're still on their side. Furthermore, you're not standing over them. You are down face-to-face with them, on their level—serious, sympathetic, supportive. They are learning what it is to be responsible, respectful, and caring.

When a child's behavior threatens the classroom community

There are a few children for whom all the things I have discussed will not be enough. Not often, but every now and then, we see in our programs one or two children who seem compelled to disrupt, shriek, and strike out no matter what the circumstance. It is with these most challenging, provocative kids that teachers must try especially hard to maintain their

It is with the most challenging, provocative kids that teachers must try especially hard to maintain their professionalism.

All children in a class benefit from a teacher's fair, firm control of misbehavior.

professionalism. At times it seems nearly impossible to speak with respect, courtesy, compassion, and patience, such as when a child hurts or scares other children or wreaks havoc in the classroom.

Before seeds of compassion and responsibility can be sown for these children, teachers have to create an environment of safety and order. They are obliged to devote a lot of thought and energy to what is going on with these one or two (or more) kids. Directing so much energy to so few may seem unfair at first glance, but in fact all children in a class benefit from a teacher's fair, firm control of misbehavior. They learn that they are safe here and that their teachers are always fair and respectful with everyone.

It is often possible over time to help an upset, acting-out child make progress in the steep ascent toward self-control. You make sure to greet such a child immediately as he enters the classroom each day, offering him a snack or a toy he likes so that he doesn't begin his day with aimless wandering or trashing. You stay close to watch for anxiety or agitation before

it turns into striking out. This is where a strong assistant or additional aide or volunteer is crucial. Teachers in these situations find themselves making a very strong pitch to their administrators for extra help. Classroom safety and order are at stake.

One stays close to such a child, not with clenched teeth and a combative attitude but rather with the unflappable conviction that as the teacher you are always in charge and he must accept your authority. You make very clear that you do not tolerate bullying or mean-spirited teasing. He must learn to heed the other children and their needs as well as his own.

You believe in the child's capacity to grow and learn. When kindness and good-natured helpfulness go along with firm teaching, the child and all of the other children can trust you. Trust opens the door to growth. With courtesy, compassion, and respect, you lay down the law and help this child live by it. You help by staying nearby; by immediately intervening in or stopping major aggression; and by honestly praising nonaggressive, acceptable behavior. You may have to be on the alert for good behavior because it may happen all too seldom, but it will happen, and

then you let the child know how much you value it. You use comments such as,

"That's an interesting way to start a block building!"

"No, I won't let you knock down Jamal's blocks. Please put them back where he had them. Come on, I'll help."

"It's your turn to help Mr. Johnson push the lunch cart down the hall to our room today. He knows you do a good job of steering and that you're very strong."

"I want you to stop running in here. You can run when we go outside. Right now I want you to help Sam wash the big paintbrushes. Do you want to wash off the easel too? Great, that'll be a big help to everybody."

"I need to have you here with us. Come sit beside me while I read the story. No? Then Mr. Lorenzo will read the story and you and I will go sit in the hall. It's storytime now for this class, and that's what's going to happen."

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Over weeks and months you will sow the seeds of safety and authority. Then comes the development, necessary for community life, of compassion and responsibility.

Every few years, it seems, a teacher faces a child so troubled, so embattled by circumstance that he cannot find a way to live with others in the classroom. If, after enormous effort along with ongoing consultation with his family, this child is unable to make progress, the teacher may have to suggest referral not only for special help but for placement in a different setting. The hope is that the child and family will find the help that is so urgently needed. This can be a very difficult and sad time for everyone. However, concern for the health and safety of all the children in the class must be first above all.

We always hope that we learn through such experiences and that these children and their families carry with them a memory of caring concern.

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Final Thoughts

The kind of leadership and guidance I have described for good teachers and other staff demands a great deal of us. It sometimes demands more selflessness, more time and energy, more stretch and reach than we can manage. Many teachers observe that children today seem much more troubled—and more troubling—than in former days. I know from my own experience that the scope of our work is enormous, that we try to hold to our standards, that we all have good days and bad days, and that excellence in teaching is not easy to maintain.

Early childhood teachers work for long hours for extremely low salaries. We've been faced, historically, with a limited public understanding of what we do, why we do it, how we do it, how we've been trained, how much we know, and the extent of our contributions to families and communities. Perhaps a

much fuller public comprehension of early education is on its way. There are hopeful signs.

Even acknowledging these realities, I will always believe that our efforts to achieve excellence in teaching are worthwhile. Why would we settle for less? The inner rewards and feelings of professional growth are wonderful. The children in our care thrive. As teachers of young children, we hope that as these youngsters grow older, parents and teachers will continue to provide strong leadership. Thus we will have helped children become respectful, confident, caring, and responsible adults.

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